



Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Religious Freedom in the Cyprus

Executive Summary

In a country divided between the Turkish Cypriot community in the north and the largely Greek speaking community in the south, Cyprus has enjoyed a measure of religious tolerance that belies its violent past. After Turkish Cypriot authorities relaxed the restriction of movements between the two communities in 2003, including the abolishing of crossing fees at buffer zones, tensions have eased considerably. The new procedures have led to a relatively unimpeded contact between the communities and permitted Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to visit religious sites located in each others community.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Introduction to the Legal Status

Under its Constitution that was promulgated in 1960 when Cyprus became independent following years of British rule, the rights for the freedom of religious practice is granted to all its citizens. This is especially salient to the Greek (94.8 percent belong to the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus) and Turkish (98 percent Sunni Muslims) communities. Article 6 of the Constitution prohibits anyone in authority from exercising their power to ‘discriminate against any of the two Communities or any person as a person or by virtue of being a member of a Community’.

The eight paragraphs of Article 18 in the Constitution spell out at length Cyprus’ commitment to religious freedom. As long as the practice of religious practices are openly held and they do not interfere the security of the Republic or the constitutional order, every person is free and has the right “to profess his faith and to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice or

observance, either individually or collectively, in private or in public, and to change his religion or belief”.

However, the choice of belonging to a religious affiliation can only be exercised by someone who has reached the age of sixteen. Until such time, those under sixteen have to profess their legal guardian's faith.

No Cypriot is required to pay taxes to support another faith. In fact all religions including the minority faith present in Cyprus are tax exempt.

Instances of Official Discrimination

Since the height of inter-communal violence in the 1960's and 1970's which forced the breakup of the island into Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot enclaves, UN brokered attempts to reunify this island nation has met with limited success. A 2004 referendum for example, was rejected by the Greek Cypriot community but the election of a new Cypriot president in 2008 served as the impetus for the UN to encourage both the Turkish and Cypriot Governments to reopen unification negotiations.

While reunification talks are ongoing, the status quo regarding the practice of religion has been largely tolerated within the Greek and Cypriot enclaves. The activity of missionaries however has been closely monitored by the government to ensure that they do not use "physical or moral compulsion" to make religious conversions or that they are involved in illegal activities that threaten the security of the republic, constitutional or public order, or public health and morals. There are occasional apprehensions but there have been no arrests under these laws.

Sectarian Instances of Discrimination and Violence

Official tolerance of the practice of religion in Cyprus notwithstanding, there have been reports of sectarian incidents in the Turkish Cypriot enclave. According to a letter sent to the US International Religious Freedom Committee last April, the American Hellenic Institute alleged that several hundred Greek Orthodox religious structures or symbols have been either "pillaged, vandalized or destroyed." These included 133 holy sites that have been "converted to military facilities, stables and night clubs." Many of the religious artifacts stolen from Christian religious sites in the Turkish occupied area of the island have subsequently ended up in auction houses in Europe and the United States such as Sotheby's.

Positive Trends

In spite of the tension between the two communities, Turks living in the Greek part of the island are permitted to practice Islam and vice versa. Since 2003, when restrictions on movement to the northern part of the island were relaxed,

Greek Orthodox Cypriots as well as other religious groups have reported better access to religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Turkish Cypriots enjoyed relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area.

Conclusion

While the UN and the EU have offered incentives to the divided communities in Cyprus towards becoming a unified entity, both sides have failed to reach any comprehensive agreements towards a resolution to their current impasse. However the practice of religious freedoms that are guaranteed in the Constitution are for the most part honored in the two enclaves albeit with isolated incidents of sectarian intolerance.